

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Views of ancient people on abortion

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Abstract

In the present short paper details of the concepts of ancient Hebrews, Greeks and Romans people about abortion are given. According to their beliefs, some of them supported the abortion and others did not. On the other hand, ethical and legal issues relating to abortion, of that time, are presented. It is seems that law and religion then left the physician to do whatever seemed best to him.

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Introduction

Ethical and legal issues relating to abortion present themselves to all health professionals including nurses from old times. According their beliefs, some of them supported the abortion and others did not.^{1,2} This

short historic paper is an over-view of the concepts of ancient people about abortion.

As for abortion many physicians prescribed and gave abortive remedies. Medical writings of all periods mention the means for the destruction of the embryo and the occasions, where they are to be employed.³

Hebrews times

Before proceeding it is interesting to add, that in the old Hebrews times, even sterility was considered a divine curse (Hesais, D, 1).⁴ It was considered man's duty to beget children so as to leave behind in his own place another worshiper of the God⁵. It is known that when Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, forbade the Egyptian midwives to kill the new born of Jewish mothers, these refused to obey the order of the Pharaoh, as the Jewish women called the midwives after birth (Exodus, A, 15- 19).⁴

Greeks times

Coming now to the Greeks, one has to refer to the famous Oath of Hippocrates (460-380 B.C.), which mentions: "I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy"⁵. For many people Hippocratic Oath reflects the ideas of the Pythagoreans.⁶ For the physician when forswearing the use of poison and of abortive remedies, Hippocrates adds: "In purity and in holiness I will guard my life and my art"⁵. It must be the purity and holiness of the "Pythagorean way of life" to which Hippocrates dedicates himself. The Hippocratic Oath was not uncontested even from the medical point of view. In antiquity it was not generally considered a violation of medical ethics to do what the Oath forbade.^{7,8} Edelstein's opinion is that the Oath itself points to other, more fundamental considerations that must have been instrumental in outlining the prohibitions under discussion.^{3,9}

Some ancient physicians rejected abortion under all circumstances. They supported their decision with a reference to the prohibition in the Hippocratic Oath and added that it was the duty



of the doctor (or midwife) to preserve the products of nature.^{9,10}

Hippocrates also considered that the fetus is viable from the moment its various organs can be morphologically recognized. A view shared by Galen (130-200A.C.).^{11,12}

According to the Pythagoreans, the embryo was an animate being from the moment of conception. Consequently, for the Pythagoreans abortion whenever practiced, meant destruction of a living being. Granted that the righteousness of abortion depends on whether the embryo is animate or not, the Pythagoreans could not but reject abortion unconditionally.⁵

In addition, the concept of other Greek philosophers about abortion is presented here.

It seems that abortion was considered an offense by most of the Athenian writers. Thus, the famous Athenian orator Lysias (5th c B.C.) refers to an Athenian by the name Antigenes, who accused his wife, for committing abortion. Lysias thought that the fetus was a human precursor, which the woman refused his husband to offer. He also questions whether abortion should not be an abuse to the mother.¹¹

For Plato (428-347 B.C.) the greater philosopher of all times, feticide is one of the regular institutions of the ideal state. Whenever the patients are beyond the age which he thinks best for the begetting of children, the embryo should be destroyed.¹² Plato also, held a rather absurd view, that abortion should be committed only, when the population of Athens was higher than 5040.¹³

This view was shared by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). He reckons abortion the best procedure to keep the population within the limits which he considers essential for a well-ordered community.^{3, 12} Aristotle also, advocates that abortion should be performed before the fetus has attained animal life; after that time he no

longer considers abortion compatible with holiness.³

Herophilos (3rd c.B.C.) a physician of the Alexandrian Medical School considered that abortion is an offense, when it is committed after the fetus is felt.¹⁴

Other philosophers and scientists thought that the fetus was considered human from the moment the soul (psyche) enter into it.

Peripatetics had the view that fetus becomes viable between 40th-80th day from conception, as from that time, the fetus started moving.^{12,14} Peripatetics were Aristotle's followers, for his lectures were conducted in the walks or avenues of the Lykeion of Athens.¹⁵

On the other hand, Stoics (e.g. Poseidonios and Chrysipos) thought that the fetus becomes a human being from the moment air enter into it (at the moment of birth).^{11,12}

Romans times

Roman teachers of law, of that time, held similar views with the Stoics. According to the old Roman law, a woman who committed abortion was exiled. In case however she committed abortion for payment, she was sentenced to death.⁷ Cicero (106-43 B.C.) for instance, reports that a woman from Malta was punished to death for killing her fetus by drugs.¹³

The emperors Septimious Sevirus and Antonius Caracallas (195-211 A.C.) punished abortion, not as a crime against life, but as an offense of deception of the husband.¹⁶ Soranus (2nd c. B.C.), the greatest of the ancient gynecologists, in agreement with many other physicians contended that it was necessary to think of the life of the mother first. He also, resorted to abortion whenever it seemed necessary, much as he deprecated it, if performed for no other reason than to preserve beauty or to hide the consequences of adultery.³

Finally, under the Christians abortion became a severe offenses mainly on became a religious grounds.¹¹

From the practical point of view it was no less important to tell the ancient doctor what to do when faced with such a situation than it was to advise him about cases of abortion.¹³ Abortion was practiced in Greek times no less than in the Roman era, and it was resorted to without scruple.¹⁰

According to Edelstein, "small wonder! In a world in which it was held justifiable to expose children immediately after birth, it would hardly seem objectionable to destroy the embryo".³ It seems that the interdiction of abortive remedies was simply the outgrowth of medical ethics. After all, medicine is the art of healing, of preserving life.¹²

Conclusion

It suffices here to state that nor did Greek or Roman law protect the unborn child. If, in certain cities, abortion was prosecuted, it was because the father's right to his offspring had been violated by the mother's action. Also, ancient religion did not prescribe abortion. That is law and religion then left the physician (or midwife) to do whatever seemed best to him (or her).

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